

Catullus 63, a song of Attis for the Megalesia

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Morning-after panic: from him to her in one easy move

Catullus 63 is one of the poet's best-known poems and the only one written in the cantering galliambic metre, which turns the written word into a charged performance. It's a rollicking good read with a sting in the tail. When we first meet its hero, Attis (lines 1–4), he is already on his travels. And he, and we, cannot get to his destination quickly enough: he is in a speedy boat, then swift of foot, intent on reaching an unknown goddess. Who is she? Who is Attis? All we are told is that he is driven on by raging madness. He is a man on a mission, even as his mind wanders.

Before we know what is happening, he has picked up a sharp stone and castrated himself. The Latin manages to be both violent and opaque – it takes a while for this to sink in – until, in a move worthy of the greatest suspense movie, we see drops of fresh blood staining the ground. In the next line (line 8), the penny drops. Attis is still on autopilot, rushing, but the adjective that describes this rushing is now feminine. All the more horrific for its subtlety, it spells that Attis is no longer a man. Yet still he/she dashes, in devotion to a goddess who is now revealed as the Great Mother, Cybele. It is only the morning after that Attis realizes

the momentousness of his actions. Staccato lines (63–4) hit hard.

*ego mulier, ego adulescens, ego ephebus, ego puer
ego gymnasi fui flos, ego eram decus olei:*

*I, a woman, I an adolescent, an ephebe, a boy,
I was the flower of the gymnasium, I used to be the glory
of the palaestra.*

Who is Attis? Who was he? What has he become? We hear the panic, and feel the pain at what he has lost. Here was a desirable young male with the world at his fingertips. Now he is a stranger in his own body. But there is no escape: as the poem limps to its close, we are told that Attis remains Cybele's handmaid forever (line 90). How far would we go in the name of devotion? How important is our sex to who we are? And to what extent will what we wish for in life ultimately alienate us from our families? As Catullus was writing, the Republic was in its final throws with men like Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey wrestling for supremacy. The poem suited these volatile times. What it meant to be a man was no longer certain.

Catullus' focus in 63 is clearly on Attis, the goddess's young devotee, who turns himself into a Gallus, or castrated priest devoted to the goddess Cybele, as Carrie Vout's introduction to the poem, above, explains. In what follows Elena Theodorakopoulos looks at the historical context for Catullus' poem, exploring the Megalesia festival, for which she proposes the poem might have been designed to be performed, as well as considering some of the issues raised by this striking poem about sexual ambiguity.

Riotous revels at Rome: Cybele, cymbals and castrated priests

In 205–4 B.C. a black rock representing Cybele, the Great Mother of the gods, known as *magna mater*, was transported to Rome from a remote part of what is now western Turkey. Some years later (191 B.C.) a large temple for Cybele was built on the Palatine; its foundations can still be seen today, and give a sense of its scale and of the importance of its position. The anniversary of its dedication was celebrated each year with the Megalesia, a festival of games and stage performances. In housing Cybele on the Palatine, the most ancient part of Rome, and establish-

ing Games in her honour the Romans may have thought they were bringing home their Trojan ancestress, perhaps even domesticating their exotic roots.

But the Great Mother was also apparently celebrated with more mysterious rites, and with a rather raucous procession through the city. We have a vivid account of this from the philosopher and poet Lucretius. He describes the cult image escorted by castrated priests referred to as Galli, to the sound of cymbals, tambourines, fierce horns, and pipes, all of which help to increase the mad excitement of their already frenzied minds. Alarming, the priests also carry knives to remind onlookers of the goddess's

castrating power. If all this could really be seen in Rome during the late Republic and onwards, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that we hear from Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek historian working in Rome during the reign of Augustus, that it was unlawful for Roman citizens to participate in this procession. Clearly, not all the cultic activity surrounding Cybele was easily palatable to the Roman mind-set. It certainly seems that the Romans may not have been quite prepared for the degree and the vibrancy of eastern ritual extravagance that came with the Great Mother. The knife-wielding castrated priests will almost certainly have been viewed with some wariness by the more conservative parts of Roman society!

Bring on the poets... Catullus and sexuality

Amongst those who will have witnessed the festivities around the same time as Lucretius were two of his contemporaries, the poets Catullus and Caecilius. Both were moved to write poems on the subject of Cybele. Catullus tells us in his poem 35 about Caecilius' work, but sadly nothing remains of it. As we have seen, Catullus'

own work on the subject survives as number 63 in the collection. Catullus' Attis is a somewhat mysterious figure. His emasculation raises interesting questions about sexuality and gender, topics in which Catullus shows an interest throughout his collection. Is Catullus in writing the character of Attis exploring his own experience of sexual ambivalence? How does the Attis poem fit into the rest of the collection, and in particular into the love-story between Catullus and Lesbia?

The idea of gender and sexual identity as part of culture rather than physiology is a familiar one. It seems that Catullus, too, in his poetry was able to explore a multiplicity of gender positions, frequently exhibiting what has been described, in a rather old-fashioned manner for modern tastes, as a 'strong dash of the feminine'. In poem 63, our poet appears to go a step further in exploring sexual identity. We have already seen how the drama of Attis' emasculation unfolds, as Attis, with extreme religious zeal and perhaps in a form of trance, castrates himself with a sharp stone, and then leads a troupe of other, similarly maimed enthusiasts in frenetic worship of Cybele. The first sign of Attis' change of identity are her snow-white hands, associated conventionally with female beauty; the second sign is the feminine ending on the participle *citata* as *she* rushes to pick up the tambourine and tap it with her tender fingers. The transition from man to 'woman' (Catullus refers to Attis as *notha mulier* – a fake woman) is as swift as the picking up of the instrument and the subsequent mad rush into the forest to reach Cybele's temple.

Only when the exhausted troupe finally collapse into deep sleep does the madness (*furor*) leave them. Now, in the cold light of day, Attis bitterly regrets her passion. In the central speech delivered by Attis on the seafront looking back over the ocean she has just crossed, it becomes clear that there is no way back. Like Ariadne in Catullus' poem 64, Attis has given up her home and her family in order to follow her passion. When Attis remembers life before the sex-change, however, what she describes is the arguably already sexually ambivalent status of a beautiful young adolescent. Attis describes her former self as a celebrated beauty with admirers competing for his attention, offering flowers and crowding the gates of his home. The 'normal' path such a young man would take in Athens, where we must imagine Attis has come from, would be to leave all this behind upon becoming an adult and to marry and procreate. It is not too far-fetched then to interpret Attis' passion for Cybele, and even his self-mutilation, as a desperate attempt to escape adulthood and marriage and to remain instead forever the ambiguous, and perhaps sexually passive, youth he so loved being.

Could we then see Attis as Catullus' exploration of the fluidity of gender-roles? In other poems, Catullus seems to experiment with taking on a submissive role and letting Lesbia appear rather dominant. Our poet is also known for adapting the words of Sappho, the Greek woman lyric poet, to express his own feelings. Elsewhere, Catullus warns a new bridegroom that he must cease playing about with young boys now that he is a married man. He also writes a number of exuberant poems addressed to Juventius, a young man he is in love with. So sexual ambiguity is present throughout Catullus' poems, and the Attis poem can be read as an exploration of a more extreme version of this.

Latin poetry and Roman life: Attis and the Megalesia

But now it is time to come back to the riotous festival of the Megalesia, and to see what relationship there might be between Catullus' poetic exploration of sexuality through the figure of Attis, and the public festivities for Cybele at Rome. These rituals are obscure but they involve an image of Attis, a 'day of blood', on which perhaps some form of ritual self-flagellation or other form of self-harm took place (possibly including the castration of a new would-be priest of Cybele). At the end of all this is a 'day of joy' on which the rebirth of Attis was celebrated.

If poem 63 was indeed a hymn written for performance at the Megalesia, the final stanza, containing the prayer to Cybele to keep her fury far from the speaker's home, would then be spoken on behalf of the Roman people, who were fascinated and repelled in equal measure by this riotous cult which they had recklessly brought into their city and needed to do their best now to romanize.

I am convinced that the poem must have been written with performance at or around the Megalesia in mind. My suggestion is that it was written for one of the gatherings patrician families held at their homes during the Megalesia (the source for this is Verrius Flaccus, a prominent historian during the time of Augustus, and perfectly named in connection with a poem about castration!). It makes sense to imagine the poem performed at such an event: the thrill of the violence and the orgiastic frenzy, the mystery of who exactly Attis was, and the sexual ambivalence of the performance, would all have provided the perfect ambience for such a gathering. And when the final lines are spoken, asking the great goddess to visit others with her fury and to keep away from the speaker's house (*domus*), they are spoken by the poet himself, whose identification with Attis' frenzy during the reading must help to appease the goddess and to keep the noble

domus in which the performance has taken place safe from harm.

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